

## News Update on Religion and Church in China November 19, 2017 – March 13, 2018

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*The “News Update on Religion and Church in China” appears regularly in each issue of Religions & Christianity in Today’s China (RCTC). Since the editorial staff learns of some items only later, it can happen that there are chronological overlaps between “News Updates” of two consecutive issues of RCTC. In these cases stories referred to in earlier “News Updates” will not be repeated. All “News Updates” can be found online at the website of the China-Zentrum ([www.china-zentrum.de](http://www.china-zentrum.de)). – The last “News Update” (RCTC 2018, No. 1, pp. 3-19) covered the period September 11 – December 2, 2017.*

### Politics

End of November 2017:

#### Mass evictions of migrant workers from their lodgings in Beijing

Toward the end of last year, Chinese media carried articles about the Chinese government’s increasingly harsh treatment of Chinese internal migrant workers living in simple, “illegal” housing in the cities. According to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, fully 35% of the Chinese work force is made up of internal migrant workers who keep the Chinese economy running with their low wages. Most of them come from the country’s rural areas, so they have no urban residence registration (*hukou*) and, as such, do not enjoy the same rights as other city dwellers.

At the end of November 2017, the government in Beijing began evicting migrant workers living in illegal housing. According to the *South China Morning Post*, one example is Feijia (a neighborhood in northeast Beijing), where entire settlements were torn down within a short time and without any warning. The official explanation was that the demolitions were necessary due to concerns for fire safety in the area. The residents suddenly found themselves homeless in sub-zero temperatures.

*BBC Monitoring* reported that it was a “city-wide 40-day crackdown” officially aimed at inspecting and razing unsafe buildings, following the deaths of 19 residents of a migrant workers’ shelter in Daxing, Beijing, that went up in flames on November 18. That this action was long in the works, however, can be seen, according to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, from the fact that immediately after the buildings were razed and the terrain leveled, trucks drove onto the site loaded with young trees to be planted where the migrant housing had stood a few hours before.

Internet users loudly criticized the authorities when it became known that the Beijing municipal government had actually referred to such internal migrant workers as *diduan renkou* (low-end-population) translated by the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* as “Abschaum der Gesellschaft” (the scum of society). Even the real estate tycoon, Ren Zhiqiang, a member of Beijing’s Political Consultative Conference, criticized the demolitions. This caused Beijing Party leader Cai Qi to slow down the pace of the evictions, but large

numbers of people were still left out in the streets, homeless (*BBC Monitoring* Dec. 10, 2017; MERICS End of Nov. 2017; *South China Morning Post* Dec. 17, 2017; *Süddeutsche Zeitung* Dec. 2, 2017).

March 11, 2018:

## National People's Congress adopts constitutional amendments, including the abolition of term limits for the office of President

The clause restricting the Chinese president to two five-year terms of office has been deleted from China's constitution. This change would allow an indefinitely repeatable prolongation of the reign of Xi Jinping, who is at present at the beginning of his second term as President. The office of Secretary General of the Communist Party, which is actually the more important, has never been limited in time. According to the BBC, the Chinese-language state media did not single out this particular amendment to the constitution, but focused instead on the entire packet of constitutional changes. Other important changes include the establishment of a "National Supervisory Commission" (国家监督委员会), an institution that brings together various state anti-corruption agencies with the Party's Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI). Unlike the CCDI, however, the new commission will control not only party members but all state employees and will be superior in importance to the Supreme Court and the Supreme Prosecutor's Office. In addition, the "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era" (习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想) was included in the preamble of the constitution.

Commentators saw the abolition of the president's term limit as the end of the principle of "collective leadership" introduced by Deng Xiaoping after the end of the Cultural Revolution as a way to prevent any future absolute concentration of power, as there had been in Mao's time (*BBC Monitoring* March 12, 2018; *South China Morning Post* March 12, 2018; *Xinhua* Feb. 25; March 11, 2018, among others).

## Religious Policy

November / December 2017:

## Coco, a "ghostly film" by Pixar is admitted by Chinese censorship and enjoys unexpected success in China's cinemas

The animated film *Coco* is about a Mexican boy who searches in the afterlife for his great-great-grandfather on the "Day of the Dead" in hopes of realizing his dream to become a great musician. As Rob Cain wrote in the business magazine *Forbes*, the film's admission into China was already unexpected, since censorship laws prohibit showing "ghosts and the supernatural" in films. Since other Pixar films had been unsuccessful in China, the high attendance figures for *Coco* were a real surprise. The "shared cultural value of reverence for one's ancestors" has greatly added to the film's appeal for Chinese moviegoers, who are "constantly defying expectations about their behavior," Cain said ([www.forbes.com](http://www.forbes.com) Nov. 27, 2017; Dec. 11, 16, 26, 2017). – See also the entry of End of November 2017 in the section "Islam".

December 2-3, 2017 / January 20, 2018:

## International conference on Falun Gong in Wuhan / According to Falun Gong, 974 of its followers in China have been sentenced to prison in 2017

As reported by the Chinese news agency *Xinhua*, 30 scholars from China, the US, Canada, Australia, Italy, Kyrgyzstan and Sri Lanka participated in an “International Conference on Cult Problems,” which seems to have been focused mainly on Falun Gong. Several professors who are mentioned by name in the *Xinhua* report [and who can be identified on the websites of their respective universities], were quoted as claiming, among other things, that Falun Gong practitioners refused medical treatment, that the charge of organ removal from imprisoned Falun Gong followers in China was untenable, and that various scholars who had criticized Falun Gong had been threatened by the group.

Falun Gong stated on its website *Minghui.org* on January 20, 2018, that in 2017, a total of 974 of its supporters had been sentenced to prison by courts in the People’s Republic of China, of whom about 320 were in the provinces of Northeast China. The average duration of the imprisonment imposed on those convicted in December was 3.3 years, the report said. In addition to the prison sentences, fines were also imposed.

Falun Gong is defined as a “heretical cult” in the PRC and, as such, is expressly forbidden (*Minghui.org* Jan. 20, 2018; *Xinhua* Dec. 3, 2017).

December 14, 2017:

## Joint Conference of official religious organizations says “No to the cults!”

At its 4th meeting, the “Joint Conference of the National Religious Organizations,” a body formed under the aegis of the State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA), addressed the question of how China’s religions should in future be involved in the authorities’ struggle against [what the government defines as] “heretical cults” (*xiejiao* 邪教). As SARA’s director, Wang Zuo’an, said at the conference, “the battle against the cults is difficult and the road is long.” According to SARA’s official report on the meeting, the religions are expected to assist the authorities in, among others, the prevention of cults and the re-education of those damaged by cults. Before concluding the meeting, the assembled religious representatives passed a corresponding appeal (SARA according to *chinaislam.net.cn* Dec. 15, 2017).

January 8, 2018:

## National assembly of directors of local religious affairs bureaus – Wang Zuo’an announces that in 2018 provisions regarding religious information services on the Internet will be issued

The conference in Beijing reviewed 2017’s achievements in the field of “religious work” and discussed plans for 2018. As reported by the *Global Times*, Wang Zuo’an, director of the State Administration of Religious Affairs, said that provisions regarding religious information services on the Internet should be passed this year. Other provisions governing the management of religious organizations, sites and activities are also to be issued or revised in 2018. Furthermore, the “Measures for the Employment and

Use of Foreign Experts by Institutes for Religious Education,” in force since 1999, are also to be revised. In addition, local governments will have to adjust their respective local religious rules to the revised version of the national “Regulations on Religious Affairs” effective February 1, 2018, Wang said (*Global Times* Jan. 9, 2018; sara.gov.cn Jan. 8, 2018).

January 29, 2018:

## State order prohibiting use of strippers at funerals

Since 2015, strippers have been in the crosshairs of Chinese law enforcement officers, concerned as they are about the social fabric of China, who see the nation’s social fabric threatened by immoral actions at funerals. While the government’s efforts in 2015 were limited mostly to the provinces of Jiangsu and Hebei (see *RCTC* Vol. V, 2015, Nos. 3-4, p. 11), on January 29 the Chinese Ministry of Culture announced a new campaign against strippers at funerals as well as at weddings and temple fairs in the provinces of Henan, Anhui, Jiangsu and Hebei. It condemned such obscene activities which are supposedly designed to attract more visitors to funerals, and to show greater homage to the deceased, as uncivilized and promised to eradicate such customs. The prohibition is meant to remind people that both pornography and public erotica are illegal in China. A hotline has been specially set up so that citizens can contact the authorities if they come to know about such obscene activities.

However, according to the *Global Times*, what these events really demonstrate is a paucity of genuine manifestations of Chinese culture among the rural population. On platforms such as Weibo, many Internet users also complained about the “low culture” of the rural population. According to the Ministry of Culture, more needs to be done to promote the cultural life of the rural population. The *Global Times* reports that the government has set aside 20 billion yuan for the construction of 600,000 “rural bookstores.” It remains to be seen whether this will yield positive results and whether “culture” can be restored through books (*Global Times* Feb. 20, 2018; mcprc.gov.cn Jan. 29, 2018).

February 1, 2018:

## Revised version of the “Regulations on Religious Affairs” comes into force – More stringent state control of religious life is expected

The revised regulations aim to, among other things, eliminate loopholes for religious freedom in certain legal gray areas which are outside the state’s framework of control. They are also aimed at monitoring more closely the activities of registered religious groups and sites and will give authorities a more concrete tool for tackling infringements. On the basis of the revised regulations, further new provisions governing details of religious life, such as religious activities on the Internet, are expected to be issued. Some recent incidents have already been seen by observers as a consequence of the new regulations, such as the regionally imposed bans on religious instruction for children during the time of the Chinese New Year holidays.

An unofficial English translation of the “Regulations on Religious Affairs” can be found at [www.chinalawtranslate.com/宗教事务条例-2017/?lang=en](http://www.chinalawtranslate.com/宗教事务条例-2017/?lang=en). See also the commentary in *China heute* 2017, No. 3, pp. 140-143 [in German] as well as the entries of January 2018 in the section “Islam” and of February 2018 in the section “Christianity.”

February 1, 2018:

## **SARA issues rules for the implementation of licensing procedures provided for in the “Regulations on Religious Affairs” – Five out of eleven involve contacts with foreign countries**

The implementation rules which became effective on February 1 were published on the website of the State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA). They give details of the application procedures for the approval of certain religious projects, such as the necessary conditions, documents to be provided, the procedure to be followed and deadlines. The document specifies the approval procedures for the following projects: religious education and training; construction of large religious statues; conversion of buildings or new buildings within religious sites; large-scale religious activities; publication and distribution of internal religious publications; founding, changing and abolishing of religious organizations. Five more out of a total of eleven approval procedures concern foreign-related projects, namely: acceptance of donations from organizations and persons from abroad; employment of foreign experts by institutes for religious education; import by foreigners of religious articles for daily use. There are also approval procedures for “exchange with foreign organizations of other [religions] than the five religions represented in China and their members with government agencies and religious circles in China” [this refers, for example, to foreign Orthodox Christians, Jews, Mormons and Baha'is] and “inviting foreign religious personnel who entered China with another status to conduct scriptural interpretation and preaching.” The new provisions replace a previous document from 2006 (text of the 宗教事务部分行政许可项目实施办法 can be found at: [www.sara.gov.cn/xwfb/xwj20170905093618359691/577024.htm](http://www.sara.gov.cn/xwfb/xwj20170905093618359691/577024.htm)).

February 4, 2018:

## **“No. 1 Central Document” announces crackdown on “illegal religious activities” in rural areas**

The first political document of each year is issued by the CPC Central Committee and the State Council, and is traditionally seen as a reference to priorities of current policy. “No. 1 Central Document” of 2018, like the documents of the previous years, addresses objectives and measures for the promotion of rural development. This time religious policy measures were also specifically mentioned. The state news agency *Xinhua* published a report under the heading “The No. 1 Central Document says ‘No’ to illegal religious activities in the countryside,” explaining that the document raises the following proposals: “According to law and with increased vigor crack down on illegal religious activities and overseas infiltration in rural villages, according to law stop religious intervention in rural public affairs, and continue to regulate chaotic construction of temples and excessive construction of religious statues in rural villages” (*Global Times* Feb. 5, 2018; *Xinhua* Jan. 4, 2018). – On the one hand, this obviously refers to traditional Chinese forms of religion, on the other hand, non-registered Christian and Muslim groups may also be targeted.

## Buddhism

December 12, 2017:

### Thousands of pilgrims attend prayer gatherings in Tibetan monasteries for the Ganden Ngachoe festival

According to the International Campaign for Tibet, thousands of Tibetans gathered in various monasteries in the Tibetan areas of the PRC, such as the Jokhang Temple in Lhasa, Rongwo Monastery in Rebkong (Chinese: Tongren, Qinghai), Labrang Monastery (Gansu ) as well as in Dartsedo (Chinese: Kangding) and Kardze (Chinese: Ganzi) in Sichuan to celebrate the festival Ganden Ngachoe, during which Tibetan Buddhists remember the death of Tsongkapa, who founded the Gelug School of Tibetan Buddhism in the 14th century. The current head of the Gelug School of Buddhism is the Dalai Lama. According to the report, the ceremonies at the various monasteries were closely monitored by large numbers of armed police who did not, however, actively interfere. *Radio Free Asia* noted that public gatherings at Tibetan monasteries in the PRC have increased significantly in recent years because Tibetans are intent on reinforcing their national and cultural identity, the broadcaster said (*Radio Free Asia* Dec. 12, 2017; savetibet.org Dec. 18, 2017).

Beginning of March 2018:

### Seventeenth Karmapa Lama Ogyen Trinley Dorje talks in video message about personal conflicts with his religious and political role

The now 32-year-old Karmapa Lama complained in his “special message” about his incomplete training in both Tibet and India and lamented the fact that unlike earlier Karmapas he has been separated from the main teachers of his tradition. He talked about the great hopes which had been placed in him and which he could not fulfill. “Many people think to themselves that being the Karmapa, you know, is like some incredible thing, but for me, that hasn’t happened. Even if I am the Karmapa, the situation is still that I really need to try hard.” He had to give up a lot and nothing was easy. “If those around me do not believe in me, then there is no reason to pretend and keep going, so for that reason, I have been depressed.”

Ogyen Trinley Dorje also complained of the mistrust expressed toward him by the Indian government, which at times had suspected him of acting as a spy of the Chinese regime. He then expressed a desire to overcome the split in the Karma Kagyu lineage (there is a second competing reincarnation of the 16th Karmapa, the Karmapa Trinley Thaye Dorje, raised in India), but said that both sides would have to be open to discuss the issue. He stressed that he had neither the ability nor the desire to be a political leader and that this did not correspond to the traditional role of the Karmapa (some had expected Ogyen Trinley Dorje to replace the Dalai Lama as the spiritual-political leader of the Tibetans in exile). At the end of his speech, he called on the Karma Kagyu community to make a joint effort to support the future of the lineage: “A single pillar cannot hold up a whole building,” he said.

The half-hour video message was first shown to thousands of supporters on March 9 at the end of the Kagyu Monlam, a prayer ceremony in Bodh Gaya, India. According to the *Buddhistdoor Global*, it has caused ripples among Tibetan Buddhists, with some interpreting the Karmapa’s words as signs of a possible resignation.

The Karmapa is the head of Karma Kagyu, one of the four principal schools of Tibetan Buddhism. Karmapa Ogyen Dorje was initially educated under Chinese control in Tibet but fled to India in 2000.

He has been in the US for the past six months ([www.buddhistdoor.net/news/the-karmapa-reveals-his-struggles-with-leadership-and-division-in-video-address](http://www.buddhistdoor.net/news/the-karmapa-reveals-his-struggles-with-leadership-and-division-in-video-address) – with a link to the video; [trycycle.org](http://trycycle.org) March 12, 2018).

## Daoism

January 21, 2018:

### ***Xinhua*: Rediscovery of the Great Shangqing Palace confirmed**

The great Daoist Shangqing Palace was built during the Song Dynasty (960–1279) and was in continuous use until its destruction by a fire in 1930. As *Xinhua* has reported, archaeologists have now been able to confirm the exact location of China's once-largest Daoist temple at the end of a four-year period of excavation. The temple is located at the foot of Longhu Mountain (Jiangxi Province), where, according to tradition, the founder of the Daoist Zhengyi sect, Zhang Daoling (34–156), lived and practiced Daoism. The rediscovered temple was dedicated to him. Remains of the temple were first found in 2014 by laborers in the area of Longhu Mountain who were preparing a scenic area to attract tourists. According to *National Geographic*, archaeologists had to sift through an area of over 176,500 square meters to accurately locate the temple complex measuring 4,600 square meters. Today, only the stone foundation of the once monumental building remains. The excavation site is rich in archaeological finds that help researchers better understand the cultural climate in which this temple was built and existed (*National Geographic* Jan. 26, 2018; *Xinhua* Jan. 21, 2018).

## Islam

November 19–21, 2017:

### **3rd National Conference on “Islam and Chinese Culture” in Beijing**

During the conference, the following seven aspects of the “Sinicisation of Islam” were addressed: 1. Islam and traditional Chinese culture; 2. Tradition and renewal of Chinese-Islamic “scripture hall education” (*jingtang jiaoyu* 经堂教育 [the term refers to a form of Islamic education developed in China using Chinese characters to represent the Arabic language]); 3. Islam and Chinese society; 4. the “Muslim Confucians” (*huiru* 回儒) and their Chinese-language translations and writings; 5. Chinese Muslims and the Movement for New Culture [1917–1921]; 6. Theory and practice of religious indigenization; 7. Religious indigenization from an international point of view. The conference was organized by the Institute of World Religions (IWR) of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and the Chinese Association of Religious Studies. IWR director Zhuo Xinping, Ahong (Imam) Yang Faming, the chairman of the Chinese Islamic Association, and a representative of the State Administration of Religious Affairs opened the proceedings ([iwr.cass.cn](http://iwr.cass.cn) Nov. 22, 2017).

End of November 2017:

## Man accused of spreading anti-Islamic content on the Internet – Court in Northeastern China finds him guilty of “incitement to ethnic hatred”

Li Zhidong, a Han Chinese, was sentenced to two years and six months in prison by the Heping People’s District Court in Shenyang, Liaoning Province, for “incitement to ethnic hatred,” according to the December 19, 2017 issue of the *Global Times*, which is under the auspices of party newspaper *Renmin Ribao*. According to the *Global Times*, between 2009 and 2016, Li founded a website and online chat groups, putting up posts that attacked Muslims and insulted Islam and the Prophet Muhammad. Hui Muslims in Gansu made a formal complaint in a petition to the government, the *Global Times* said. Experts quoted by the newspaper called the verdict a “lesson” and said that Islamophobia should not be tolerated in China.

Reports of an anti-Islamic sentiment on the Chinese Internet have been accumulating for some time now (see also *RCTC* 2017, No. 2, p. 11). Against this background, it is noteworthy that in January, the film “Secret Superstar” by Indian Muslim producer Aamir Khan became a blockbuster in Chinese cinemas. The film is about a Muslim girl who, despite her father’s negative attitude, fulfills her dream of becoming a famous singer by appearing on YouTube disguised with a veil (quartz.yz.com Jan. 30, 2018).

December 11, 2017:

## *Global Times* reports on government order to remove unauthorized *halal* logos from restaurants in Urumqi

Restaurants in Urumqi were ordered to remove or hide unauthorized *halal* markings on their signs, the *Global Times* said, citing local officials. According to the same source, only those *halal* markings bearing a serial number issued by the Chinese Islamic Association are considered authorized (*Global Times* Dec. 11, 2017).

January 2018:

## Authorities in heavily Muslim Linxia prohibit children from attending religious education during the New Year holiday

Authorities in Guanghe County in Linxia Hui Autonomous Prefecture prohibited children from attending religious education during the New Year holiday in January, *Reuters* reported on February 17. Similar measures had been reported from Linxia City, *Reuters* said. In a previous report it was even said that children were forbidden to enter religious sites.

The Linxia Prefecture government, which oversees both Linxia City and Guanghe County, responded to questions from *Reuters* saying that the Chinese constitution required the separation of religion and education. It was unclear whether the ban would continue after the holidays. The Information Office of the State Council told *Reuters* that China guarantees citizens’ rights to religious freedom under the law, including children, adding, however, that China is determined to “prevent and severely crackdown on the use of religion to carry out illegal activities.” Li Haiyang, an imam from Henan, told *Reuters* that such prohibitions had previously been issued orally but were often ignored; this time, however, the authorities seem to be serious about their implementation, the imam said.



Thus far, the Hui Muslims had a rather relaxed relationship with the authorities; but now they fear that the government wants to use the same kind of measures against them as it is already doing against the Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang, according to *Reuters*. There are many Chinese-speaking Hui Muslims living in Linxia Prefecture, and more than 50% of the population in Linxia City, also known as the “Chinese Mecca,” are Hui.

The *Global Times*, citing local Communist Party website chinalxn.net, reported that on January 19, 2018, Communist Party members on the Linxia Prefecture Party Committee had signed a pledge not to have any religious beliefs. In November 2017, the *Global Times* had portrayed Islam in Ningxia as an obstacle to poverty reduction (*Global Times* Jan. 23, 2018; *Reuters* Jan. 17; Feb. 17, 2018; see: *RCTC* 2018, No. 1, p. 10).

For similar prohibitions affecting Christian children see the entry of February 2018 in the section “Christianity.”

January 29, 2018:

### **Citing the policy of the separation of education and religion, the *Global Times* reports critically on holiday courses for “left behind” Muslim children in Yunnan**

Mosques in Yunnan during the winter holidays teach Arabic, Quran and Islamic culture to Muslim children and teenagers “left behind” by their parents working in far-flung cities, the *Global Times* reported. An employee of the Islamic Association of Yunnan confirmed this to the newspaper. Then, the report quotes Xiong Kunxin of Minzu University of China as saying this is “inappropriate,” because the worldview of teenagers has not yet been established and it is therefore “dangerous to brainwash them with religion.” The *Global Times* was referring to the provision in Article 36 of the Constitution, “No one may make use of religion to engage in activities that [...] interfere with the educational system of the State,” along with a similar passage in the Education Law (*Global Times* Jan. 20, 2018).

March 10, 2018:

### **Chairman of the Chinese Islamic Association (CIA) demands that society’s concerns about excessive use of *halal* thought not be ignored**

According to a *Global Times* report, the CIA’s chairman Yang Faming said that Islam has caused concerns in China that should not be ignored, such as Chinese mosques strikingly imitating foreign architecture, or excessive use of *halal* thought in some regions of China. He spoke of religion interfering “with the secular lives of the people, with some people paying more attention to religion than to national laws” and calling themselves believers rather than citizens. Yang made these comments during the meeting of the Chinese Political Consultative Conference in Beijing, according to the *Global Times*. The paper also quoted Shen Guiping of the Central Institute of Socialism as saying that overemphasizing religious ways of life would lead to religion spreading to other social realms and leading to the separation of a group from the rest of society, which would be a “public problem.”

The *Global Times* has reported on several occasions that there is a growing sense of displeasure among the Chinese Internet public opinion about an expansion of *halal* thought perceived as excessive. On the other hand, according to Lanya Feng in a post in *The McGill International Review*, some non-Muslim consumers in China consider *halal* foods safer. The *halal* food sector thus gains a competitive

advantage and the imams who ritually participate in the production of food have a certain economic and political power, Lanya Feng argued (*Global Times* March 11, 2018; *mironline.ca* Feb. 5; see: *RCTC* 2018, No. 1, p. 9).

## Christianity

From February 2018:

### Henan Province: Ban on Christian New Year's couplets and increasing pressure on Christians



In principal a fine example of the “Sinicization” of Christianity: Dismantled New Year's couplets with Christian motifs. Photo: *UCAN*

that these measures were directed primarily against the rapidly growing Protestant communities, with the Catholics being caught, as it were, in the crossfire.

The US-based China Aid organization also reported that Christians in Henan were coming under increasing pressure from the government. It said that since the beginning of February, local security and religious authorities have been threatening members of house churches with fines. In Nanyang, all religious gatherings in private homes were explicitly banned; participants or hosts of any such meetings held outside of registered religious sites will be subject to a fine of 30,000 Yuan (US\$ 4,750), China Aid reported. The organization linked such increasing pressure with the entry into force of the above-mentioned revised “Regulations on Religious Affairs” (*chinaaid.org* March 3, 7, 2018; *china.ucanews.com* Feb. 21, 2018).

According to statements by various Catholic priests working in the province quoted by *UCAN*, Catholic and Protestant households have been requested to remove traditional New Year's couplets with Christian content from all front doors in several places in Henan in the areas of the Xinxiang and Puyang Dioceses. The order was partly in writing, partly oral. According to one report, the village party cadres prevented the faithful personally from hanging the banners outside their homes.

A priest by the name of Fr. Paul from the Diocese of Luoyang told *UCAN* that he had been informed that small meeting places would be closed unless they could show an official registration certificate and that priests who did not have a certificate for religious personnel would no longer be allowed to perform religious rituals. Another priest, this time from Anyang Diocese, told *UCAN* that his diocese had received official notice that no further training courses would be allowed for adult believers and that religion classes for minors would be absolutely forbidden. He was of the opinion

## Protestantism

December 8, 2017:

### Six Christians in Yunnan Province sentenced to prison on charges of cult involvement

According to China Aid, six Christians in Yunnan Province were sentenced by the People's Court of Yun County to prison terms ranging from four to 13 years on the charge of belonging to the "Three Grades of Servants," of organizing secret meetings and of establishing a secret organization. The Three Grades of Servants are a Heilongjiang-based religious group with a Christian background that is considered by the authorities to be a "heretical cult" and is banned as such. China Aid has reported that the six Christians deny belonging to this group and have appealed against the verdict. The report also indicated that in Yunnan Province's 2016 campaign against the Three Grades of Servants dozens of Christians were also arrested who had nothing to do with the group (chinaaid.org Feb. 14, 2018; *Radio Free Asia* Jan. 18, 2018).

December 29, 2017:

### National Assembly of Chinese YMCA / YWCA

At the National Assembly of Chinese YMCA and YWCA Associations in Beijing, Wu Jianrong was again appointed Secretary General of the YMCA, and He Xiaoqing became General Secretary of the YWCA. The meeting was held under the motto: "To serve society with concentrated power, to give a new witness amid the realization of the magnificent 'Chinese dream.'" The associations of the YMCA and YWCA all over the country were encouraged to study the principles of the 19th Congress and to act in their spirit (sara.gov.cn Dec. 29, 2017).

*Isabel Hess-Friemann*

January 9, 2018:

### Protestant megachurch demolished by authorities

In Linfen City, Shanxi Province, the Chinese authorities have razed the "Golden Lampstand Church" despite intense protests on the part of the church's members. With powerful excavators and jackhammers, workers soon reduced the huge building to rubble. According to China Aid, the church has been under government pressure since its construction in 2009 and church leaders have been imprisoned repeatedly. According to *America Magazine*, the *Global Times* had said that the accusation had been made that the church had been "secretly built" and in violation of building codes. The church was demolished as part of the government's campaign to "remove illegal buildings" from urban centers, thus *Global Times*. Eight members of the church were arrested in 2009 for "illegally occupying farmland" and "disturbing traffic order." There were many expressions of concern that these and similar measures might be linked to the revised "Regulations on Religious Affairs" that came into effect on February 1, 2018 (*America Magazine* Jan. 25, 2018; *The Guardian* Jan. 11, 2018; *UCAN* Jan. 11, 2018).

January 7–16, 2018:

## World Council of Churches visits China

To mark its 70th anniversary, representatives of the World Council of Churches (WCC) visited the People's Republic of China in a bid to strengthen relations between the WCC and the CCC (Chinese Christian Council). In addition to Secretary General Olav Fykse Tveit and two other delegation participants, WCC Asian President Sang Chang also took part in the visit. With stops in Shanghai, Nanjing and Beijing, the WCC group met with representatives of the Three-Self Movement, the Christian Council and also with faculty and students from various educational institutions. In addition, they also held discussions with representatives of the State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA).

Since its participation in the WCC's 1991 world assembly in Canberra, the Chinese Christian Council has been a full member of the WCC. Following an historic first visit by leaders of the WCC to China in November of 2016, this stay sends a signal to the regime highlighting the importance of the community of Christians in China in the eyes of the world. Secretary General Tveit stressed the particular relevance of the Chinese churches for the Christian witness and its future development in global ecumenism (oikoumene.org Jan. 12, 2018).

*Isabel Hess-Friemann*

February 21, 2018:

## Death of Billy Graham – Reactions in China

The death of the American evangelist Billy Graham at the age of 99 was received with great sympathy in the People's Republic. Billy Graham visited the country twice – in 1988 and 1994. His wife, Ruth Bell Graham, was born in China as the daughter of a missionary and spent her youth there. Gao Feng, President of the China Christian Council, and Fu Xianwei, Secretary General of the Three-Self Movement, issued a letter of condolence calling Billy Graham a dear friend of the Chinese Church and one of the most influential Christian leaders in the world. Representatives of the State Administration of Religious Affairs were present as guests at the funeral ceremonies (www.ccctspm.org/newsinfo/10174 [text of the letter of condolence]; chinachristiandaily.com Feb. 23, 2018).

*Isabel Hess-Friemann*

March 8–13, 2018:

## Six Chinese Christian Council members attend the WCC World Mission Conference in Arusha, Tanzania

A delegation of six, headed by Lin Manhong, Deputy Secretary General of the Chinese Christian Council, participated in the World Mission Conference in Arusha, Tanzania. The motto under which the 1,024 delegates shared together in forums and workshops was "Moved by the Spirit – Called to be transformed." The gathering in Tanzania was the 13th conference of its kind organized by the WCC since the beginning of the ecumenical movement in Edinburgh, Scotland in 1910. On the podium in front of representatives of all the Asian churches, Pastor Lin emphasized the need to embed proclamation of the Gospel in the modern day context in order to make it effective as a prophetic leitmotiv (ccctspm.org March 12, 2018).

*Isabel Hess-Friemann*

## Catholicism

December 7, 2017:

### Underground Bishop Matthias Yu Chengxin of Hanzhong has died

Bishop Yu, almost 90 years old, was retired Coadjutor Bishop of Hanzhong in Shaanxi Province. He was buried on December 12. The Requiem Mass and burial were celebrated by the official Bishop of Hanzhong, Luis Yu Runshen.

Bishop Yu Chengxin was born into a Catholic family on February 28, 1928. He was the younger brother of Bishop Bartholomew Yu Chengti, also Bishop of Hanzhong. All three of the bishops Yu were recognized by Rome, but only Luis Yu has the recognition of the Chinese government.

Young Matthias Yu entered the Hanzhong Minor Seminary in 1950 and from 1956 continued his studies in the regional seminary of Kaifeng, which, however, was closed only two years later. During the Cultural Revolution, Matthias Yu was initially under house arrest and then spent a long time in a labor camp. He was ordained in the underground Church in 1981 and worked as a spiritual director and Latin teacher at the Hanzhong underground seminary. He was considered a happy man who made his rounds to the villages by bicycle in order to administer the sacraments.

On December 12, 1989, he was secretly ordained Coadjutor Bishop of Hanzhong after his brother Bartholomew, the then Underground Bishop of Hanzhong, had been arrested in November following the attempt to establish a bishops' conference for China's underground bishops. In 2005, there was a reconciliation between the diocese's official and underground sides, after Rome granted its own approval to official (state approved) Bishop Luis Yu shortly before the death of Pope John Paul II in 2005. Bartholomew was the Ordinary of the diocese until his death in 2009, when Luis took over the leadership.

Bishop Matthias Yu himself never exercised his episcopal ministry. Already in 2007 he was severely limited by a stroke. In addition to his poor health, *AsiaNews* reports that, according to a reliable source, Bishop Matthias did not want to endanger the unity in the diocese following the death of his brother.

In a statement signed by all the priests of Hanzhong and read out at the funeral, it says, "He never exercised his episcopal ministry and never allowed others to call him bishop, nor did he ever appear with the episcopal insignia, in private or in public. He has always considered himself and has always served the Church as a priest" (Quote from: *AsiaNews*) (*AsiaNews* Dec. 13, 2017; *Fides* Jan. 30, 2018; *UCAN* Dec. 14, 2017).

December 16, 2017:

### Shanghai Cathedral reopened after restoration – but without Bishop Ma Daqin

After two years of renovations, the 112-year-old Neo-Gothic St. Ignatius Cathedral in the Xujiahui District of Shanghai reopened on December 16 with a solemn Mass. The Mass was presided over by Fr. Wu Jianlin, Chancellor of the Diocese of Shanghai, with 50 Chinese and foreign priests from Shanghai and other dioceses concelebrating. About 2,000 of the faithful were present for the Mass.

Absent from the celebration was Bishop Thaddäus Ma Daqin, who has been under house arrest in Sheshan Seminary since 2012, but who for some time has been allowed to move about a bit more freely. There was some speculation that had he been permitted to be the main celebrant for the Mass, it could have been interpreted as a sign that he was now allowed to resume his episcopal ministry. This, however, was not the case. That morning Bishop Ma posted a picture of himself on WeChat with the words: "I am here at Sheshan Seminary."

In June of 2016, an open letter from Bishop Ma, in which he expressed regret for his earlier resignation from the Patriotic Association at his episcopal ordination on July 7, 2012, caused a good deal of irritation. Three months later, he was re-admitted to the Patriotic Association and given two official posts. At Easter of 2017, Bishop Ma concelebrated in the Diocese of Mindong with the illegitimate Bishop Zhan Silu, whom he had rejected laying hands on during his episcopal ordination. All this was interpreted as a sign of Bishop Ma's reconciliation with the authorities, and as a sign of hope that he could soon exercise his episcopate, a hope which seems, however, to have been premature.

The Shanghai Cathedral was built in 1905 and since 2013 has been recognized by the State Council as part of China's cultural heritage. Water damage and structural defects eventually required major renovations (*AsiaNews* Dec. 18, 2017; *UCAN* Dec. 21, 2017).

**December 27, 2017:**

## **Parishioners' protests accompany the demolition of the only Catholic church in Zhifang**

In Zhifang, a village near Xi'an, Shaanxi, shortly after Christmas, the only Catholic church in the town was demolished by the authorities, *UCAN* reported. During the demolition, some of the Catholic faithful protested in front of the local municipality building because the police would not allow anyone near the church itself. The priest blogger Shanren told *AsiaNews* that the church was built in 1999 as more and more people from the surrounding hill areas moved down into the Laoyu Valley. Over time, this region has developed economically and Father Shan believes that it is really economic reasons that lay behind the demolition. According to community sources, the church was legally built 20 years ago, after all the necessary permits had been obtained. The property, *AsiaNews* reports, has been used consistently by the Catholic community for pastoral purposes.

The authorities had informed the community of their plans just one week before the demolition date. The reason for the government's action was the allegedly illegal claim to the property on the part of the Church. *UCAN* based its report on information from one WeChat user who confirmed what Father Shan had told *AsiaNews*: The government had designated this former municipality as a "scenic spot" for tourists. This change in classification as well as the recent completion of a nearby highway had already multiplied the value of the land many times over (*AsiaNews* Dec. 28, 29, 2017; *UCAN* Jan. 5, 2018).

**January 27, 2018:**

## **Wenzhou Bishop Shao Zhumin returns to his diocese after seven months of enforced disappearance and house arrest**

Underground Bishop of Wenzhou, Bishop Shao Zhumin, recognized by Rome but not by the government, was "taken away" by officials on May 18, 2017. His whereabouts were not known for a long time. In September, he sent a WeChat message saying that he was in a hospital in Beijing, where he was undergoing an operation on an ear. After that he was known to be under house arrest in Xining, in Qinghai Province. He was released at long last on January 3.

According to both *AsiaNews* and *UCAN*, during his detention, the authorities in vain placed considerable pressure on him to join the Patriotic Association. In early December he reportedly was instructed to sign a document listing four conditions for his recognition as bishop by the authorities; these conditions included support for the principle of an autonomous and independent Church in China, support for the self-election and self-ordination of bishops, as well as concelebration with an illegitimate bishop. According to *AsiaNews* and *UCAN*, he refused, however, to cave in to the government's demands. In

June of 2017, both the German Ambassador in Beijing and the Vatican intervened with public statements calling for Bishop Shao's release. On December 18, Bishop Shao's own Diocese of Wenzhou launched a diocese wide campaign of prayers for his release.

According to *UCAN*, on December 29, 2017, Fr. Lu Danhua, an underground priest from the small diocese of Lishui, which is administered by the Diocese of Wenzhou, was abducted by officials of the local Religious Affairs Bureau. After more than a week, his whereabouts were still unknown. According to one source, he had been brought to Wenzhou for reeducation (*AsiaNews* Dec. 19, 2017; Jan. 31, 2018; *UCAN* Jan. 10, 2018; see: *RCTC* 2017, No. 3, pp. 11-12 and 18; No. 4, p. 16).

### Beginning of February 2018:

## There are reports that churches in some areas now have put up signs that say: "Minors are prohibited from entering"



Metal sign announcing "No access for minors" on the lower right of the entrance gate to this Catholic church in Nanle County, Henan Province. Photo: *UCAN*.

explained, among other things, that party members and minors were expressly forbidden to enter church buildings. A man by the name of Peter, a Catholic layman from central China, told *UCAN* that he had personally seen such signs at Catholic churches in Xinjiang (where minors are also prohibited from entering mosques). He said that local legislation prohibiting minors from setting foot in religious sites lacks any legal basis and is unconstitutional, since the Constitution guarantees citizens' freedom of belief. The Law on the Protection of Minors also states that children and adolescents should not be discriminated against because of their religious beliefs, Peter said (*china.ucanews.com* Feb. 8, 2018; *UCAN* Feb. 8, 2018).

Citing information obtained from a local priest, *UCAN* reports that authorities have urged Catholic underground communities in some areas of Hebei Province to put up signs of "access forbidden to minors" at their churches and places of worship, with threats that they would be prevented from using the churches at all if they failed to comply. There have also been reports from Henan Province about the posting of such prohibitions on churches there.

Fr. Thomas from Henan told *UCAN* that after the Chinese New Year, he was visited by officials who ex-

### Beginning of February 2018:

## Catholic youth camps forbidden in Shanxi and Inner Mongolia

According to *AsiaNews*, several priests in Shanxi, Inner Mongolia and other parts of China received a warning in early February that they would no longer be permitted to hold youth camps in future; some parishes had in fact received a letter to that effect from the local Religious Affairs Bureau. As Chinese New Year (February 16) was imminent and many congregations use the New Year holiday as well as summer vacations to gather children and young people for catechesis, this order was all the more criti-

cal. *AsiaNews* saw it as arising out of the revised “Regulations on Religious Affairs,” which went into effect on February 1. There had already been reports on local prohibitions of Christian education as far back as August of 2017 (*AsiaNews* Feb. 3, 2018; see: *RCTC* 2017, No. 4, p. 12).

According to a survey carried out by Renmin University’s China Religion Survey on the situation of registered religious sites, published in 2016, 32.2% of the Catholic and 16.3% of Protestant sites surveyed offered summer camps for the youth in 2013; for the other three religions, the percentage was below 5% (see *RCTC* 2017, No. 2, p. 29).

**February 5, 2018:**

## **Faith Institute for Cultural Studies (FICS) for the first time publishes countrywide baptismal statistics for the entire year**

According to the survey conducted by the FICS together with the official Catholic governing bodies’ Chinese Catholic Research Center, in 2017 a total of 48,556 people were baptized in mainland China’s Catholic communities. The report said that the numbers were incomplete. Baptisms in the underground parishes are probably only partially recorded (*Xinde* Feb. 5, 2018). For further details see the “Statistics on Religions and Churches in the People’s Republic of China” presented in the current issue of *RCTC*.

**February 8, 2018:**

## **SARA visits Catholic bodies – Chairman of the official Bishops’ Conference announces a 2018 conference on “60 years of self-election and self-consecration of bishops”**

Director Wang Zuo’an and other officials from the State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA) visited the headquarters of the (official) Chinese Bishops’ Conference and of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, in order to convey their New Year’s greetings to those leaders of the two bodies who reside at the bodies’ headquarters in Beijing. According to the report on the website of the two bodies (neither of which are recognized by Rome), Bishop Ma Yinglin stated that the Patriotic Association and the Bishops’ Conference are making preparations for a 2018 conference to mark the 60th anniversary of self-election and self-consecration of bishops in the Chinese Church. He further said that with the implementation of the “Five-year Plan for the Sinicization of the Catholic Church” as a central theme and the implementation of the “Three Systems for the Democratic Management of the Church” as a goal, they wanted to raise the work of the two bodies to a new level (*AsiaNews* Feb. 10, 2018; *china-catholic.cn* Feb. 8, 2018).

Sixty years ago, on April 13, 1958, two Chinese priests, the future Bishops Dong Guangqing (Hankou) and Yuan Wenhua (Wuchuan), were elected bishops by the Patriotic Association which had been founded in 1957, and consecrated without a papal mandate. Before their consecration, the Vatican had rejected the request of the Patriotic Association for recognition of their chosen candidates.

The “Three Systems for the Democratic Administration of the Church” are three controversial statutes of the official Catholic bodies of 2003; they are statutes for the Joint Assembly of the two bodies (中国天主教爱国会、中国天主教主教团主席联席会议制度), for the administration of the dioceses (中国天主教教区管理制度) as well as for the work of the Patriotic Association (中国天主教爱国会工作条例). They can be found online at: [www.chinacatholic.cn/html/category/14050346-1.htm](http://www.chinacatholic.cn/html/category/14050346-1.htm).



February 21, 2018:

## Solemn opening of the “Year of Youth” in the Diocese of Taiyuan



Year of the Youth in Taiyuan Diocese.  
Photo: chinacatholic.org.

The Diocese of Taiyuan, which is located in Shanxi Province, has proclaimed a “Year of Youth.” The special year opened on February 21 in the Xiliulin Church under the leadership of Bishop Meng Ningyou, with the participation of 2,000 young people, 60 priests, 28 sisters, 5 deacons and 24 seminarians. The motto for the opening day was “Seek.”

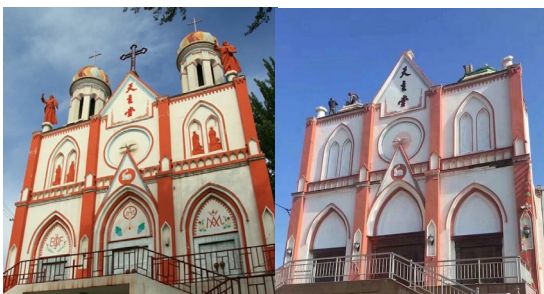
In his homily, Bishop Meng Ningyou referred to the upcoming World Bishops’ Synod in Rome in October of 2018, which will be held under the motto “Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment.” At the opening ceremony, Father Li Yonglong said that the goal of the Year of Youth in Taiyuan is to bring together the youth of the diocese so that they can better witness to the faith. A young woman, representing the young people of the diocese, called on the diocese to set up a Youth Ministry Office. The opening program also included a solemn inaugural procession through the village with the participants bearing great icons and relics of saints, among them two saints from Xiliulin village, St. Wu Anbang and St. Zhao Quanxin, both of whom were killed during

the Boxer Uprising. According to the secretary general of the diocese, Father Lü Xufeng, the holy martyrs should be both role models and encouragement for young Catholics today.

Other events planned during the course of Taiyuan’s “Year of Youth” include an event for the promotion of vocations to the priestly and religious life, one on “Church knowledge” and a singing competition called the “Alleluia Cup.” A youth pilgrimage is also being planned as an important part of the year (chinacatholic.org March 23, 2018).

February 27 and March 8, 2018:

## Crosses, statues and bell towers removed from churches in Xinjiang and Henan Provinces



The Catholic Church in Yining before and after the destructive measures. Photo: UCAN.

The first case occurred at a church in Yining, Xinjiang Province. Not only were the crosses removed from the roof on February 27, but the twin bell towers over the church façade were also completely dismantled, and all identifiably Catholic elements removed from the façade, leaving only the words “Catholic Church” and a small bas-relief image of a dove representing the Holy Spirit. UCAN’s website carries photos that document these events.

The removal of the crosses and also the artistic images of the “Stations of the Cross” along the

church's inside walls took place not only in Yining, but also in Manas and Hutubi in Xinjiang. *UCAN*, citing unnamed sources, said that these actions had been launched under the slogan "Sinicization" of the religions in China.

The second case occurred in Shangqiu, Henan Province. On March 8, ten crosses were taken down from various buildings on the site of the Shangqiu Cathedral ("South Church") by order of the Road Bureau and District Committee. Believers reported the incident to both the People's Congress and the Provincial Political Consultative Conference. As a result of these protests, authorities later permitted three smaller crosses to be put up again on the cathedral, one above the door of the Cathedral and one cross on the small church next door to it. In Henan Province, in addition to this first case of cross removal, there were also reports of other "anti-Church" actions (see the entries from February 2018 in the section "Christianity" and at the beginning of February in this section).

In Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province, the faithful have secretly re-installed red crosses on three churches, which they then guarded through around the clock prayer vigils. "There's something fundamentally wrong with a church building not having a cross," *World Magazine* cites a believer from one of the communities affected (*AsiaNews* March 2, 2018; *UCAN* March 1, 13, 2018; *World Magazine* Jan. 29, 2018).

## Sino-Vatican Relations

Christmas 2017:

### Vatican lends its support to emergency relief work by Jinde Charities

According to the *Vatican Insider*, just before Christmas and "with the Pope's placet", the Vatican Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development gave US\$ 100,000 to fund projects benefitting poor mountain communities of Hebei and Guizhou Provinces. The sum was handed over to the Catholic Jinde Charities in Shijiazhuang, which supported the projects as one of their main initiatives in 2017. On June 3, 2017, Jinde Charities organized a charity concert at the Beijing Cathedral, which was also attended by representatives of both the United Front and the State Administration of Religious Affairs SARA (*Vatican Insider* Feb. 13, 2017).

January 22, 2018:

### *AsiaNews* reports that the Vatican has asked the legitimate underground bishops of Shantou and Mindong to step down as Ordinaries so that two illegitimate bishops can be recognized by the Holy See and appointed Ordinaries (diocesan bishops)

Before a – reportedly almost finalized – agreement between the Vatican and Beijing on future episcopal appointments can be signed, both sides are negotiating the future role of the 7 bishops, who were consecrated without the consent of the Pope and whom the Church therefore considers illegitimate. Beijing is demanding that the Church recognize them and the Church, in turn, is seeking recognition from the government of the 30 or 40 bishops of the underground who are still unrecognized by the government. In two cases, that is, in the dioceses of Shantou and Mindong, the dioceses are "doubly" staffed by an underground bishop recognized only by Rome and by an official bishop recognized only by the government (in a third case, Qiqihar / Heilongjiang, there are overlaps). The problem is that

according to ancient Church tradition there can only be one diocesan bishop in a diocese since the Ordinary is the “head” of the Church in any given place and there can only be one head.

*AsiaNews*, citing local sources, reported on January 22, that on December 18-22, 2017, government officials escorted 88 year old underground Bishop Zhuang Jianjian from Shantou in Guangdong Province, southern China, to Beijing. There, on December 21, he first met three officials of the State Administration of Religious Affairs, followed by a meeting with a delegation of the Holy See. According to the *AsiaNews* report, the Vatican delegation asked Bishop Zhuang to step down as diocesan bishop so that Bishop Huang Bingzhang, born in 1967, could become the local Ordinary and legitimate bishop of Shantou. Huang, in turn, was ordained bishop without papal approval in 2011, after which the Vatican announced his automatic excommunication; the government considers him to be the diocesan bishop of Shantou.

Then, according to *AsiaNews*, the Vatican delegation met another bishop unrecognized by the papacy in the Diocese of Mindong (Fujian Province), 57 year old Bishop Zhan Silu, whom the government considers to be the bishop of Mindong. The diocesan bishop recognized by the Pope is 59 year old Bishop Guo Xijin, who belongs to the underground community of Mindong Diocese, which in this diocese is in the majority. *AsiaNews* reported that the Vatican delegation asked Bishop Guo to accept a reduction of rank to the position of either Auxiliary Bishop or Coadjutor Bishop to Bishop Zhan.

This far, this description of events has not been officially confirmed by the Vatican. Secretary of State Parolin did, however, mention in a general way in an interview (see below) the possibility that “someone is asked to make a sacrifice, small or great.” *America Magazine* cited an anonymous Vatican source that essentially corroborated the events described (see below). Bishop Zhuang confirmed to *UCAN* that the meeting in Beijing with the Vatican delegation had taken place but without going into any details. Bishop Guo Xijin spoke to Ian Johnson of the *New York Times* and said that if he received a verifiably genuine document from the Vatican, “then we must obey Rome’s decision,” thus indirectly confirming the process (*America Magazine* Feb. 2, 2018; *AsiaNews* Jan. 22, 2018; *New York Times* Feb. 1, 2018; *UCAN* Jan. 26 and Feb. 1, 2018; *Vatican Insider* Jan. 31, 2018).

On this topic see also the entries of January 29, 2018, January 31, 2018 as well as of February 1 and 2, 2018 in this section.

January 25, 29, 30 and 31; January 2, 5; February 9; as well as March 11, 2018:

## Chinese *Global Times* reports on developments in Sino-Vatican relations

The English-language *Global Times*, which appears under the umbrella of the party newspaper *Renmin Ribao*, but sometimes represents somewhat more independent views, reported in detail on the developments, always with one eye on the revelations of the non-Chinese media. An editorial on February 5 said that Pope Francis had made “substantive concessions to China” regarding episcopal nominations. It said that some Western media and “a few radical religious groups” that “have no right to intervene in bishop appointments” are unhappy with the Holy See’s attempts to settle the conflict with Beijing. The deal, if wrapped up, will be “tremendously beneficial to Catholics,” the editorial claimed, predicting that “sooner or later” Beijing and the Vatican would enter into diplomatic relations. It further said that the Chinese public “generally respects each pope,” and that Pope Francis has a positive image.

January 29, 2018:

## Cardinal Zen reveals that he has given the Pope a letter from Bishop Zhuang and relates what the Pope said to him about the negotiations

In a post on his blog, former Hong Kong bishop Joseph Cardinal Zen – who has long been warning the Vatican against too much compromise towards China, which he attributes, however, not to the Pope himself but to his co-workers – wrote that on January 10, at the end of the public audience in the Vatican, he handed the Pope a letter from Bishop Zhuang, together with a translation and an accompanying letter of his own. The Cardinal further related that on the evening of January 12, he was able to speak with the Pope about “the worries of his faithful children in China.” According to Cardinal Zen, the Pope told him: “Yes, I told them (his collaborators in the Holy See) not to create another Mindszenty case” (<http://oldyosef.hkdavc.com/?p=967>).

József Mindszenty was Archbishop of Esztergom-Budapest. Because of his resistance to Communism, he was imprisoned several times and lived in asylum at the US Embassy in Budapest from 1956 until he went into exile in 1971 at the request of the Holy See.

The revelations of *AsiaNews* and Cardinal Zen caused great confusion in the Church, both inside and outside of China, and in part also incomprehension and disappointment with the Vatican; others expressed approval for the Vatican’s dialogue initiative.

January 30, 2018:

## Vatican denies “presumed difference” on China issues between the Pope and his collaborators

The director of the Holy See’s press service, Greg Burke, said that the Pope was in constant contact with his collaborators, especially the Secretariat of State, on issues concerning the Church in China and was informed in detail. He added that it was regrettable that people within the Church are fostering confusion and controversy by claiming the opposite (<http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2018/01/30/0089/00168.html>).

January 31, 2018:

## Secretary of State Pietro Parolin explains in an interview why the Vatican is in dialogue with China – the main objective is the preservation of communion

As Head of the Secretariat of State, Cardinal Parolin is responsible for negotiations with China. In an interview with *Vatican Insider*, he said that the main purpose of the dialogue with China is to maintain the communion of all the Bishops of China with the Bishop of Rome and to reconcile the two communities within the Church in China on the path towards unity. It is a matter, he said, of finding “realistic pastoral solutions that allow Catholics to live their faith and to continue together the work of evangelization in the specific Chinese context.” The concern of the Holy See is that the Church in China could be “fully Catholic and, at the same time, authentically Chinese.” There are still many wounds that can only be healed with the balm of mercy, Cardinal Parolin said. He affirmed that the Church “will never forget the past and present trials and sufferings of Chinese Catholics,” but asked that “no

one should cling to the spirit of opposition to condemn his brother or use the past as an excuse to stir up new resentments and closures.” Parolin also asserted that the Pope himself is personally following up contacts with the Chinese authorities. “All his collaborators act in concert with him. No one takes private initiatives” ([www.lastampa.it/2018/01/31/vaticaninsider/eng/inquiries-and-interviews/parolin-why-we-are-in-dialogue-with-china-C8mlJsD0PDNsmsx7db6ZIJ/pagina.html](http://www.lastampa.it/2018/01/31/vaticaninsider/eng/inquiries-and-interviews/parolin-why-we-are-in-dialogue-with-china-C8mlJsD0PDNsmsx7db6ZIJ/pagina.html)).

**February 1 and 2, 2018:**

### **Unidentified “senior Vatican source(s)” give details on events surrounding Bishops Zhuang and Guo to media – Agreement on episcopal appointments has been achieved, but “it is not a great agreement”**

Speaking to *America Magazine*’s Vatican expert Gerard O’Connell, a “senior Vatican source” who wishes to remain anonymous, called the January 22 report of *AsiaNews* “substantially accurate,” adding that since the beginning of negotiations, Beijing has insisted that all 7 illegitimate bishops had to be legitimized and recognized by the Holy See as the ordinary bishops of their respective dioceses. The 5-member Vatican delegation in December was led by Archbishop Claudio Maria Celli, *America Magazine* said. According to the magazine’s report, Celli assured Bishop Zhuang that Beijing had agreed to recognize him as bishop emeritus and not force him to sign a document regarding the independence of the Church. In tears, Bishop Zhuang agreed to obey the Pope, but after returning home he seems to have changed his mind. The magazine further reported that during his meeting with the delegation, Bishop Guo strongly opposed the proposal but said that he would obey the Pope. After the conversation with the two underground bishops, at the next meeting sometime after Chinese New Year, a papal decree for the pardon and legitimacy of the 7 bishops could be handed over to the Chinese negotiating team for the Beijing authorities and, in a next step, the agreement would be ready for signing, the report said. However, the Vatican source did not see the signing as assured, as there are those in the PRC who “do not want it to happen.”

On February 1, *Reuters* also cited a high-ranking Vatican source as saying that an agreement on bishop appointments was ready and could be signed “in a few months.” “It is not a great agreement, but we don’t know what the situation will be like in 10 or 20 years. It could even be worse,” the source said. After that, “we will still be like a bird in a cage but the cage will be bigger;” suffering would continue (*America Magazine* Feb. 2, 2018; *Reuters* Feb. 1, 2018).

**February 2, 2018:**

### **Bishop Marcelo Sánchez Sorondo, Chancellor of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, exalts the Chinese as “the ones who best realize Catholic social teaching today”**

In an interview with *Vatican Insider*, the Argentinean Curia Bishop said he had found an extraordinary country during his trip to China: the common good was paramount, there were no slums or drugs, and politics were not dominated by the economy as in the US. Beijing “defends the dignity of the person,” the bishop said.

Several commentators found that such an idealization of China simply went too far; Bernardo Cervellera wrote in *AsiaNews* that this is an “ideological affirmation that makes a laughing stock of the Church

and harms the world.” According to *UCAN*, also Chinese Catholics were very critical of the bishop’s statement.

Already in August of 2017, when Bishop Sorondo was attending a conference in China on organ donation and transplantation, the Chinese *Global Times* quoted him as saying that “China could be a model we need today to respond to globalization, a model for the dignity and freedom of human being” (*AsiaNews* Feb. 7, 2018; *UCAN* Feb. 12, 2018; *Vatican Insider* [Spanish edition] Feb. 2, 2018; see also: *RCTC* 2017, No. 4, p. 17).

### Beginning of March, 2018:

## Several official bishops in China comment on the state of Sino-Vatican relations and speak in favor of an agreement

During the time of the annual sessions of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC, starting on March 3) and the National People’s Congress (NPC, starting on March 5), several Chinese bishops made comments towards various media. According to summaries of these comments by *UCAN* and *AsiaNews*, Bishop Fang Jianping of Tangshan, an NPC member, said he hoped that Sino-Vatican relations would have a good result this year, and he also said he was confident that the two parties could reach an agreement on the appointment of bishops. Excommunicated Bishop Lei Shiyin of Leshan, a CPPCC member, said that diplomatic relations between China and the Vatican would have a positive impact on China’s overall influence internationally. Zhan Silu, illegitimate bishop of Mindong (see entry of January 22, 2018 in this section), said that a breakthrough in relations had been achieved and that there were no obstacles, “as long as everyone just thinks of the benefit of the Church for the sake of peace.” Asked how the Underground Church should be administered in the future, he said that joint management was necessary, and that believers, priests and sisters should unite for this purpose. Bishop Shen Bin of Haimen, another CPPCC member, admitted that the topic was sensitive. These bishops all hold leading positions in the official Catholic governing bodies, and comments on the subject by so many of them were very unusual. Three Chinese bishops are elected delegates to the NPC (*AsiaNews* March 13, 2018; *UCAN* March 12, 2018).

### March 12–13, 2018:

## Representatives of China attend conference on organ trafficking held in the Vatican

According to *AP*, Wang Haibo, deputy head of the China Organ Transplant Response System, which regulates the official allocation of organ donation in the People’s Republic of China, said at a press conference on March 14, that China is working hard to prevent the underground trade in organs that takes place in remote, non-medical facilities which are not easy to identify. Among other things, the authorities are trying to track down communications between potential buyers and sellers, he said. In the past 10 years, he continued, 220 arrests have been made for illegal organ trafficking and 100 victims have been rescued. During the closed-door Vatican conference, the media were not admitted to the sessions.

Since January 1, 2015, there has been a regulation in force in China according to which only organs from volunteer donors may be used for transplants (instead of organs of executed prisoners). China, however, has rejected independent inspections (*AP* according to the *Washington Times* March 14, 2018; *Global Times* March 11, 2018).

On February 7–8, 2018, Chinese representatives have for the first time attended a conference on organ trafficking inside the Vatican. In August of 2017, the director of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, Bishop Sorondo, had attended a conference on organ donation in Kunming, China (see: *RCTC* 2017, No. 2, p. 18; No. 4, p. 17).

## Taiwan

December 7, 2017:

### Delegates from the Taiwanese National Council of Churches visit Pope Francis

In his address to them during an audience in the Vatican, Pope Francis encouraged a delegation from the National Council of Churches of Taiwan to work for greater unity and active Christian charity and to promote educational projects for young people. Recalling his recent trip to Asia, he said that he was “able to experience the vitality and the enterprise that mark the peoples of Asia, but also the suffering face of a humanity all too often deprived of material prosperity and social well-being.” Since the establishment of the National Council of Churches of Taiwan in 1991, the Catholic Church, thus the Pope, “through the Chinese Regional Bishops’ Conference, has been committed ... to promoting greater unity between believers in the Lord.” According to the Pope, young people should be educated in the art of dialogue “so that they can become protagonists of a much-needed culture of harmony and reconciliation.” This would encourage them “to pursue, with God’s help, the path that leads from conflict to communion, a path that has shown itself so fruitful in the ecumenical journey” (*AsiaNews* Dec. 7, 2017).

February 10, 2018:

### Buddhist Prayer beads now on a smartphone App

The Taiwanese technology group Acer wants to bring the ancient Buddhist prayer practice of turning prayer beads in the hand into the 21st century, reports Anne Wisman of *Buddhistdoor Global*. The prayer beads, known as *mala*, have been used for centuries to keep track of the recitation of certain Buddhist prayers. According to the tradition, the higher the number of prayers recited using the beads, the more good karma that can be gained. Acer is promoting its “smart prayer beads” with the claim that now those who pray would no longer be distracted by having to count the number of recitations and could focus more on the prayers themselves. The company’s advertising for the App implies that the quality of prayer can be increased through the innovative use of their smart technology. Following the current trend of using smartphone apps for statistical observation of everyday life, these advances in prayer life can then be documented with the help of an App supplied by Acer. These devotional advances in acquiring karma are then noted on one’s online account as “online,” the *Taiwan News* reported. Some Buddhist Internet commentators, however, are skeptical of this development simply because the tech giant has an obvious commercial ambition in gaining access to the considerable Buddhist consumer base in Taiwan (*Buddhistdoor Global* Feb. 13, 2018; *Taiwan News* Feb. 10, 2018).

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